

Coins

Sifting through sands of time

By Roger Boye

WHENEVER Dennis Groh finds old coins in the ruins of an ancient Palestinian city, he gets excited.

Not because he's a coin collector or rare coin investor. Rather, he knows that the coins, caked with centuries of dust, will be invaluable to him and other archeologists in discovering some secrets of ancient man.

For the last three summers, Groh, 39, sifted the dirt that covers the ancient city of Meiron, on Mt. Meiron, in northern Israel. Work on the excavation has been conducted by scholars from Duke University and the Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, where Groh is a professor of the history of Christianity.

"Archeologists use coins and pottery to determine precisely when an ancient city existed," Groh said. Although Groh's specialty is pottery, he knows more about old coins than many numismatists.

Coins made by ancient man don't carry dates. However, scholars usually can determine when and where an ancient coin was made by identifying the

symbols and the ruler depicted on it. From the coins and other artifacts found at Meiron, Groh and his coworkers know the city thrived from the first to the fourth centuries A.D.

Coins also help archeologists determine the location and use of ancient trade routes. For example, coins found during the excavation of another ancient Jewish town indicates that the local merchants traded with persons living in or near Syria, rather than in Palestine as had been assumed, Groh said.

Although coins are vital in historic research, Groh also appreciates them for their beauty and for what they reveal about ancient rulers.

In spite of having handled many ancient coins (as many as 10,000 have been found at Meiron and two other sites during the last eight years), Groh doesn't get to keep any of them. Excavated coins are property of the government owning the land being explored, although institutions represented by members of the digging teams occasionally receive some coins, too.